

Statement of Rep. Zoe Lofgren
Hearing on: “Member Day”
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
April 18, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Larsen, for this opportunity to submit testimony on my priority issues for FAA Reauthorization.

I have been actively engaged in the Reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA) research and development activities as part of my work on the Committee on Science, Space and Technology, where I am Ranking Member. We recently held a hearing in preparation for our Committee’s work on the R&D title that will contribute to this Committee’s FAA Reauthorization legislation. During that hearing, I spoke about the urgency of addressing leaded aviation fuels, because what we know now is that this is a dangerous public health crisis that is affecting my constituents in California’s 18th congressional district.

Leaded fuels have been out of the engines of cars and trucks for more than 25 years, but leaded aviation gasoline (avgas) is still the primary fuel used in the piston-engine planes and helicopters that are the dominant aircraft of the General Aviation sector. In fact, general aviation is the leading source of airborne lead emissions in this country. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has concluded that there is no known safe level of lead in the blood for human health, and lead exposure can be especially harmful to childhood development. The greatest impacts of lead emissions in the air and deposits on surfaces and in the soil are felt by general aviation airport workers and the communities surrounding general aviation airports around the country.

In California’s 18th District, there is a small general aviation airport in East San Jose, the Reid-Hillview Airport (RHV). In 2021, the County of Santa Clara (the County) commissioned a study of the blood lead levels of children surrounding RHV. The authors of that study reported that they found systematically elevated lead in the blood of those children, and the levels rose in correlation with proximity to the airport. During periods of high piston-engine aircraft traffic, the study reported that children near Reid-Hillview Airport experienced an increase in blood lead levels that exceeded that of what the children in Flint, Michigan, experienced during that water crisis.¹

In response to these findings and ongoing calls from the community to address the issue, the County voted to ban the sale of leaded avgas. After the County stopped offering leaded fuel at RHV the FAA actually threatened to sue them to force sale of the same leaded avgas that was shown to be poisoning children living near RHV. I and my colleagues representing neighboring districts in the County have been working on this issue with the Secretary of Transportation and the President. Through our efforts an agreement was recently reached that pauses the FAA’s legal action while a framework for airports to transition to unleaded fuel is studied, allowing a

¹ Mountain Data Group, Leaded Aviation Gasoline Exposure Risk at Reid-Hillview Airport in Santa Clara County, California 1 (2021), available at: <https://news.sccgov.org/sites/g/files/exjcpb956/files/documents/RHV-Airborne-Lead-Study-Report.pdf>

pilot project through which the County can dispense only unleaded fuel at RHV and another small airport in the County. This is just a temporary fix to a longstanding and serious problem.

We need to reach a permanent solution to the problem of leaded avgas. The FAA has been carrying out R&D toward achieving unleaded avgas for many years pursuant to Congressional direction provided through the Science, Space, and Technology Committee's work on the R&D titles of FAA reauthorizations. The 2012 FAA Modernization and Reform Act included direction for FAA to work with NASA on the qualification of an unleaded fuel. The 2012 Act also directed, that the FAA should, "at a minimum," develop an R&D plan with specific objectives, assess methods and processes for expeditious certification and approvals, assess technologies to modify existing aircraft for safe operation using unleaded fuels, and develop recommendations for appropriate policies and guidelines to facilitate a transition to unleaded avgas. In 2014, FAA established the Piston Engine Aviation Fuels Initiative (PAFI) to support the testing and evaluation of unleaded fuel candidates, with a goal of eventually identifying at least one unleaded fuel that could widely replace leaded avgas by 2018, which was obviously not achieved.

As of 2022, only two candidate 100-octane unleaded fuels, from two different fuel developers, were being tested at FAA, and neither had yet formally entered the PAFI program for full evaluation.²

In 2022, the FAA announced a new government-industry partnership, the Eliminate Aviation Gasoline Lead Emissions (EAGLE) initiative, with a goal of a "transition to lead-free aviation fuels for piston-engine aircraft by the end of 2030, without compromising safety or economic health of the general aviation industry." While I'm pleased the FAA is taking further action to address the avgas issue, 2030 is not a timeline commensurate with the urgency of protecting the health of children, the workers at general aviation airports, and the communities exposed to leaded aviation fuel.

In this year's FAA reauthorization and the Science Committee's work on the FAA R&D title, I will be looking at ways to further R&D toward a solution. I will be looking at ways to advance the FAA's relevant work on development, testing, standards development, and certification activities in the interest of identifying and widely deploying an alternative to leaded avgas for piston-engine aircraft at the earliest possible date. I also want to explore the testing and evaluation efforts of the FAA R&D enterprise going on now, including those conducted as part of the new EAGLE initiative, and identify ways to support and advance the work. Further, I want to examine options for eliminating the barriers that have stalled progress in this area for so long.

It is my hope that my work to prioritize this issue in the Science Committee will complement efforts by your Committee to make the transition away from leaded avgas a reality for our country as soon as possible. To support these efforts, I request that the FAA Reauthorization streamline the certification process for unleaded fuel, as it is currently lengthy and complex. To ease the cost burden associated with transitioning to and deploying unleaded avgas, I urge the Committee to prioritize incentives for deploying unleaded avgas. Tax incentives should be offered for private sector companies who choose to enter the unleaded avgas market. And, for

² https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/PAFI_%20Background%20and%20Program%20Updates.pdf

airports who choose to make the transition to unleaded, I ask that the FAA Reauthorization include grant eligibilities, whether these come in the form of expanding current grant eligibilities or by establishing new grants, for the infrastructure demands associated with this transition, including but not limited to the purchase and installation of new and additional fuel tanks.

In addition to the disincentives posed by the lengthy and complex certification process and the costs associated with deploying unleaded avgas, another impediment to this transition is uncertainty and a lack of information surrounding unleaded avgas. I urge the Committee to direct FAA to issue guidance regarding the benefits and safety of unleaded avgas, as well as information for airports that clarifies best practices for deploying unleaded avgas. I also request that the FAA hold information sessions on this topic for stakeholders, including pilots and airport officials.

It cannot be left to individual airports to transition away from leaded avgas—there must be a nationwide mandate as soon as possible. A patchwork of bans on leaded avgas will allow pilots to continue fueling up where leaded avgas is still available and landing and taking off from those communities that have opted to put their health and safety first.

It is also important to note that only does the continued use of leaded avgas pose a serious public health problem, but it is also an environmental justice issue. Leaded avgas disproportionately impacts low-income and minority communities, which are more likely to be found in close proximity to airports, like the East San Jose community surrounding RHV in my district. These communities are also often the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the use of leaded avgas. With what we know about the negative health and environmental impact of leaded avgas, failing to end the use of leaded avgas sends the message that the health and safety of these communities is not a priority.

I would also like to take this opportunity to advocate for inclusion of language in the upcoming FAA Reauthorization that would assist with the closure of RHV. Along with voting to ban the sale of leaded avgas, in 2021, the County responded to strong, decades-long calls from the community by voting to fast-track closure of the airport. As noted previously, RHV is in close proximity to residential neighborhoods and has become increasingly incompatible with the surrounding community. The airport has been the source of numerous noise complaints from local residents and has been the subject of numerous safety concerns due to its close proximity to residential areas, including airplane crashes near homes. There has been an increasing demand by local residents for the land that RHV is currently situated on to be repurposed to better serve this low-income, majority minority community, such as to increase housing supply and for recreational open space for the residents. I ask that language similar to what was included in the 2005 FAA Reauthorization for the closure of the Rialto Municipal Airport be included with regards to closure of RHV. This would include language to assist the County with buyback of lands where the airport is located and assistance with repayment of federal grants.

I thank the Committee for providing me the opportunity to provide testimony and look forward to working with you on the pressing issue of ending the use leaded avgas in the United States.